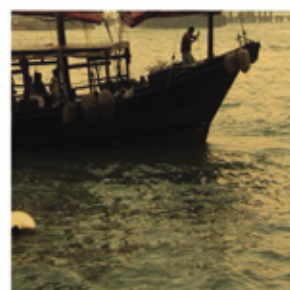
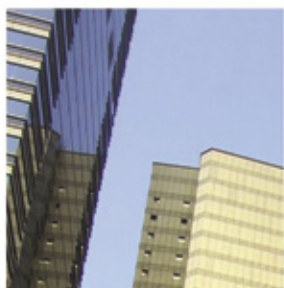


PLAYING CATCH UP

As China's economic progress steams ahead, the country's working practices have lagged behind. But not any longer. Steve Sibbald finds out why the Chinese are taking in, not out. ►





It's not what you know, but who you know as the old saying goes. Ask any successful businessman or budding entrepreneur and they will all agree that there is a lot of mileage in that statement. Many would-be moguls starting out with high ambitions and dreams of building their own money-raking empire do so with the notion that a good education, combined with pure gall and a lot of determination, is enough to secure their piece of the pie. This is by no means always the case, however. As in many walks of life, meeting the right people is paramount to becoming successful and anybody wanting a lesson in how to achieve this should look no further than to China.

Knowing the right kind of people is imperative to creating any kind of successful business.

While the native tongue may well be one of the most difficult to master, there is only one key word which is required when looking to build, and of course, maintain a strong business in China – 'Guanxi'. The word roughly translates as 'connections' or 'relationships' but is being used in its original form more and more frequently in the western world, as the English equivalent fails to do it any real justice. For a simple six letter word, it has taken on a life of its own and has grown into more of a 'concept' that has become etched into the brains of the millions, who strive to see their company make it to the top.

Steve McCarthy runs a successful printing merchants in Newport, south Wales. To meet him today, he comes across as an astute, dynamic and focused kind of guy, but rewind back to 15 years ago and you would see a very different image of a young man struggling to make his way in the world. "I first moved to the Chinese city of Harbin back in '93 with a four year plan. I knew what

I wanted to do and how I was going to do it. I was a little wet behind the ears, fresh out of college and not really willing to take on board the advice from others. I honestly believed that I could make a real go of it with what I had acquired and learned during my academic years."

Like so many young wannabe businessmen, Steve was not fully aware of how the system operated and his company folded after only a year of trading, leaving him in debt and with no choice but to return to the UK. But it's an experience which he doesn't regret for a minute as he goes on to explain what he gained from his time spent in Harbin. "It taught me a lot of lessons, chiefly that knowing the right kind of people is imperative to creating any kind of successful business. Building up a good list of contacts is a skill, but the importance of honing this skill in China was

catch up – nadgonić, nadrobić
to steam ahead – iść szybko do przodu
to lag behind – zostawać w tyle
budding – obiecujący, dobrze się zapowiadający
entrepreneur – przedsiębiorca
mileage – tu: prawda
would-be mogul – domorosty potentat
money-raking – zgarniający kupę forsy
gall – tupet, czelność
someone's piece of the pie – swoja działka dochodu, tu: swój zarobek
paramount – najwyższej wagi
to master – opanować
roughly – z grubsza
to become etched into – wyryć się w
to strive – dążyć do czegoś
to make it to the top – dojść na szczyt
merchants – zakład handlowy
astute – sprytny, bystry
to rewind – cofnąć
wet behind the ears – „zielony”, niedoświadczony
to take on board – uwzględnić
to make a go (of sth) – rozkręcić (coś)
to acquire – zdobyć, nabyć
wannabe – niedoszły
to fold – zwinąć (interes)
debt – dług
chiefly – głównie
to hone – doskonalić

something I wasn't prepared for. I've come across many people who have watched their businesses fall by the wayside over there and all cite similar kinds of problems as reasons for their failure."

Indeed, anyone who has made a name for themselves in the Chinese business world will be able to bombard you with endless tales of 'mixing it up' with the right people and building up a sound collection of 'Guanxi'. That many of these tales will involve money exchanging hands, or plying government officials with expensive booze is by the by. It's the house rules and you've got to grease a few palms and pay your dues, or you might as well forget it.

However, there is a belief at the moment that, like many things in China, the old traditional sense of the word appears to be changing and is being replaced by a new, updated and slightly different meaning. A young breed of moguls is starting to re-invent the concept in keeping with the modern age, giving it a fresher feel, and they are doing their best to take the emphasis away from its slightly seedy and old-fashioned 'back scratching' connotations.

Whereas in the past, business may have been conducted behind closed doors, these days people are far more willing to meet up in trendy bars for dinner parties, allowing a much more user-friendly atmosphere and, of course, that all-important chance for 'outsiders' to break into the loop.

"If I knew back then what I know now, I would have had no problems starting up a business in China," believes McCarthy, before going on to suggest that things were indeed tougher a few years ago. "By all accounts, things have changed for

the better and opportunities are opening up as more and more people look to invest in the Chinese market.

I just didn't have the contacts when I was there and that is essential. Even more so back then."

But is it really that much easier in this day and age? Mathew Keene is a 31 year old self-made millionaire, who hit it big in China less than eight years ago by starting up his

own haulage firm in Beijing. Today he is based in Spain and the UK, but is back and forth to the nation's capital on a regular basis, to oversee the running of the company.

As the top dog, Keene often gets to rub shoulders with some of the China's more prestigious characters and suggests that the 'Guanxi' game is ▶

*to fall by the wayside – nie udać się
failure – porażka*

*mixing it up – obracanie się (w towa-
rzystwie), zapoznanie się*

sound – solidny

to ply with – zasypywać czymś

booze – alkohol

by the by – nawiasem mówiąc

*to grease palms – „posmarować”
(dać łapówkę)*

to pay one's dues – zapłacić należne

updated – uaktualniony

breed – rasa

in keeping with – w zgodzie z

seedy – podejrzany

*back scratching – robienie sobie
wzajemnych przysług*

to conduct – prowadzić

willing – chętny

all-important – arcyważny

*to break into the loop – tu: dostać się
do kręgu*

tougher – cięższy, trudniejszy

by all accounts – naprawdę, rzeczywiście

to hit it big – odnieść sukces

haulage firm – firma przewozowa

is based in – ma siedzibę w

back and forth – tam i z powrotem

to oversee – nadzorować

(to be) top dog – wieść prym

to rub shoulders with – stykać się z

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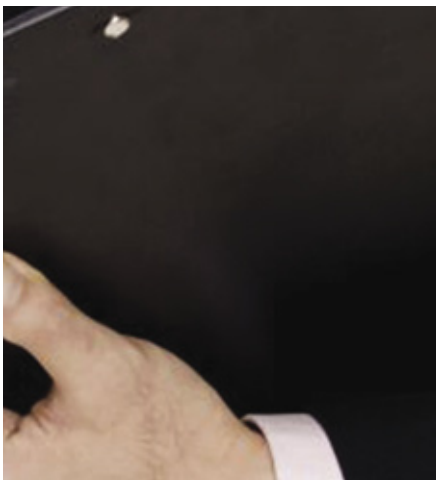
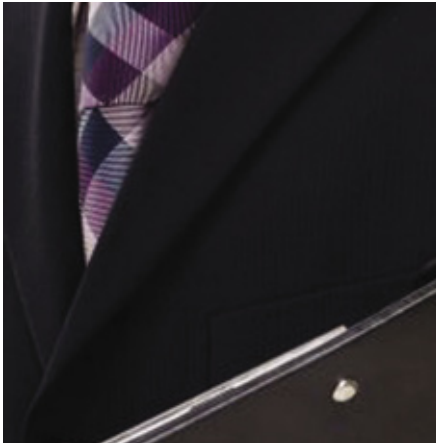
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as alive and kicking as it ever was. "It never fails to make me laugh when I read or hear that times are changing in China. I visit two or three times a year and nothing has changed, it's the same story today as it was when I first began. Starting up a firm is never easy anywhere but China is a unique place and you need to understand the rules before making an attempt. If you don't play by the rules then you're on a hiding to nothing."

There is a lot of truth in Keene's sentiments. Like McCarthy, many have attempted to make a name for themselves in China but simply ended up shooting themselves in the foot through their ignorance of the nation's social and business etiquette.

However, it's not too difficult to see why investors and would-be businessmen are willing to put their necks on the line and pour money into the country. Many financial experts predict that by the year 2025 China will hold the proud title of the world's largest economy and people are queuing up to get their bit of the action.

One person who believes that China's mentality towards building up a list of contacts is changing is Yang Yuanqing, the chairman of major computer manufacturer Lenovo. He states that the main reason for this fresh approach to dealings in business is the increasing number of Chinese who are gaining the opportunity to move abroad and as a result, take on board new ideas from different cultures which they can then use in their homeland. "More and more Chinese who studied or worked overseas understand how to build these networks." Good news for those in the west then, who will be looking forward to seeing China adopting a system more familiar to their own.

Many financial experts predict that by the year 2025 China will hold the proud title of the world's largest economy and people are queuing up to get their bit of the action.

But whether China will completely eradicate its old ways remains to be seen. It's certainly not something which will happen right away and it depends on whether those pulling the strings and involved at the top of the pile actually want things to change. Old habits die hard and one could quite easily come to the conclusion that there are too many people wielding such influence who are quite happy with the way things operate at the moment, thank you very much.

"I don't see any reason to change things. It worked for me and it has worked for countless others in the past," states Keene, who is quite content to let things continue as they were before. "What people have to remember is that it's not like Britain or France or Holland. It's China. The people and the country have different traditions and different methods of doing things. If you are aware of this and are willing to accept this, then you will get along just fine." ■

kicking – ożywiony, pełen zapału

attempt – próba

(to be) on a hiding to nothing – (być) na straconej pozycji

to shoot oneself in the foot – niechcący sobie zaszkodzić

to put one's neck on the line – nadstawiać karku, ryzykować

to queue up – ustawiać się w kolejkę

fresh approach – świeże podejście

dealings – stosunki, kontakty

overseas – za granicą

to eradicate – wyplenić

to pull the strings – pociągać za sznurki
at the top of the pile – na samej górze, na szczycie

old habits die hard – trudno wykorzenić stare nawyki

to wield – dzierżyć, władać

content – zadowolony

to get along – radzić sobie